

Maybe, Tomorrow

Debbie Edwards

Hope is dangerous; it is a delusion. And "maybe" is for liars, I think as I listen for a break in the silence on the other end of the receiver. Laura is crying. She got halfway through "malignant" when her voice cracked. And now I wait, temples pulsing and fingers growing numb with apprehension, for her to finish her sentence. Then, it will be my turn to speak, to console. But not with hope. Hope is a mirage of optimism which crushes those who are naive enough to let themselves be comforted by its ambiguous promises. She is my best friend, and she is weak now. I must be strong. I must protect her, keep her from falling into the trap.

I press my lips together and hold them tight. By the time she finishes, I can taste the salt of my own tears as they seep through the cracks and dissolve on the tip of my tongue.

I give her comfort, the only kind I can give. I tell her I'm sorry about her mother. I remind her that there are more tests which will show the spread of the disease. I tell her not to be afraid of what she doesn't know and that she must wait, hold her fear, until we get all of the facts.

And still she wants more. She wants me to paint a dream for her, to comfort her with false security. She wants me to tell her that everything will be okay. But I won't do it; it's not true. We are both biology majors; we both know the odds of surviving intestinal cancer; and we both know the side effects of its treatment. No, everything will **not** be okay, and I will not lie to Laura.

I grab a flowered, paper napkin from its flimsy, plastic holder and wipe the tears from the mouthpiece. I breathe deep and let the air out slowly before placing the phone back in its cradle. I will stay with her tonight.

But, then, I will stay with Laura always.

"Best friends 'till the end," we had chanted when we were younger, hand in hand, jumping the giant asphalt squares of the sidewalk along Berwick Street. Some days the mercury would dip well below zero, but I never felt the chill.

Together, we were impenetrable. She always said that as long as she had me beside her, she could make it through anything. She never realized — never found out — that she was the strength behind our

union. And, even now, I hide my weakness well. She calls me for consolation. I am her touchstone.

But I am made of clay.

I arrive around 8 p.m., turning on lights as I pass through the rooms. Laura doesn't seem to notice how dark it is and smiles at me apologetically. The apartment is small, but "plenty big," Laura's mom had said, "for two girls." They moved in only two years ago, after her father had died, and yet it is already hard for me to remember them any place but here. They made it into a comfortable home, full of lightly-stained wood, plants, and needlework. It always seems quiet, a peaceful tranquility reflecting the harmony of the two women who share its space. I visit often.

Laura heats a frozen pizza, and I try to keep the conversation light. She tries hard to participate, but most of her replies are slow nods from a head with red, puffy eyes and a mind filled with worry.

After dinner, we fold laundry and watch Wimbledon highlights on the late-night news. I prompt Laura to give me some tips to improve my game, and we even laugh once. But with the darkness of early morning comes fatigue. We have worn out all defensive chatter, and we begin to talk about Laura's mom. I repeat what I said earlier. I explain that all you can do, in any situation, is to wait. You prepare yourself for several outcomes, and when all the facts are known, you make decisions and follow your course of action. The facts will help you plan your future, and you just have to wait and see what they are. There is no virtue in speculation.

She agrees with me, but tears spill, and I see the pleading in her eyes. She is begging me to create an illusion, to build her a fantasy. But fantasies are easily destroyed. I hold fast. I will cry with her; I will cry for her. I will hold her and share with her my strength. But I will not promise her happiness. I will not lie to Laura.

Weeks pass, and I become Laura's fortress - at her side through hospital visits and sleepless nights. I protect her from the well-wishers who attempt to soothe her with false statements. They mean well, but they don't know her like I do. She doesn't need empty comfort - she needs truth. Her mother is much worse, and Laura grows more pale with each day. I won't let them set her up for devastation. I constantly remind her of the facts.

I won't let them trick her like he tricked me. Holding me close against his work shirt and stubby cheeks, he whispered that she

would come back. That I had to wait, be a strong little girl, don't cry.

I made plans for my mother's return. I even made a list once.

They would not let me visit her in the round, white building on the hill. But I sent her letters, made of colored construction paper, crayon, and Elmer's glue. On good days she would write back, a wide and irregular scrawl on yellow paper.

I kept every one of those letters. Everybody said I was brave. For 15 years I was brave.

Until, inside the walls of the round, white building, I looked into her frightened and confused eyes. I bent down to hold her, and she shrank from my trembling hands.

"You forgot to bring me my medication this morning."

She stared at me, eyes full of accusation.

And I had run, from the rejection, from the pain, but mostly from the deceit. I had cried on Laura's firm shoulder, as she held me, filling me with her strength.

In time, I became impenetrable once again, a mirror reflecting the stability of my one and only means of support.

And, still, Laura believes that I am the brave one.

And even when Laura tells me of her mother's death, standing in front of me - half hysterical - quaking with each word, I am strong for her. Her shrieks pierce the solitude of the apartment. She falls to her hands and knees, head hung low, telling me that she is alone, and afraid. Her fingers bury into the thick, shag carpeting and hold tightly to the strands. She says she is unsure of whether she can go on with her life . . . I sit with her, using one of my hands to cover hers and the other to rub her back. I hold her for hours, rocking her gently. I remind her that there are relatives to be notified and funeral plans to be made.

The rain falls in a heavy mist as Laura and I, in silence, walk the grounds to her mother's burial site. The sky is overcast, and the trees and grass below share a somber shade of dark gray. The flowers on the casket aren't enough to brighten the setting, and the cold dampness of the spring shower finds its way deep into the heart of us all. I reach down to grasp Laura's lifeless hand, placing it between my own. But she remains silent. She stares at her toes through the entire service and through the condolences which follow. I help her when I can.

And, after an hour or two, we are the only two left at the grave site. We have made it - I am proud. I have shielded Laura from the deception of hope. There are no crushed dreams to lament or whis-

pered promises to regret. She is strong, like me. I want to look into her eyes. I want to see, through her tears, the gratitude she feels for my protection. But her head is turned away. I realize that she has hidden her eyes from me since early this morning.

I made a motion in the direction of the car and wait for her to turn and face me. Our eyes meet, but her gaze does not give me the comfort I deserve. She is not crying. Hers is not a look of thankfulness but one of betrayal. My heart swells to my throat, and I find it difficult to swallow. Her eyes rivet mine with the resentment of a troubled soul, a soul which longed to be placated, to be fooled, by hopeful promises. A soul which received no solace in the honesty of my words. And, now, she has scars, perhaps even deeper than those left by shattered dreams. Thunder pounds the afternoon sky, and I stand helpless at Laura's side.

I have failed.

I reach to hug her, but she is indifferent to my touch.

And as I lead her back toward the parking lot, the rain begins to fall in big, heavy drops. I cannot look at her, and my jaw is tight, but I manage to choke out one phrase, barely audible, into Laura's cold ear.

Maybe, tomorrow, we can picnic in the sun.